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Intimacy, Sex, and Critical Technical Practice

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Published in:
Proceedings of Sexual Interactions Workshop, CHI 2006

Publication date:
2006

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Gibbs, M., Howard, S., Kjeldskov, J., Vetere, F., & Satchell, C. (2006). Intimacy, Sex, and Critical Technical Practice. In *Proceedings of Sexual Interactions Workshop, CHI 2006* Association for Computing Machinery. <http://people.cs.aau.dk/~jesper/pdf/conferences/Kjeldskov-C37.pdf>

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‘Was it good for you darling?’ – Intimacy, Sex and Critical Technical Practice

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Abstract

Sexual expression is innately intimate. How can digital technology, which is so often meant to be generalized and catch-all, hope to service such a particular human activity as sex? On the basis of seven weeks of ethnographic data collected across six pairs of co-habiting partners, we have theorized about the nature of intimacy [1, 2, 3], developed artifacts for its mediation [4, 5, 6] and explored methods for its study [7]. In this workshop we wish to take this work as our departure point, and reflect on: the importance of approaching intimacy and its relationship to sex critically [8, 9]; the complex and multiple meanings of intimacy in the context of ongoing intimate relationships; and finally, the losses and risks attendant on supporting intimacy between distributed couples.

Keywords

mediated intimacy; mediated sex, critical technical practice,

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3 Group and Organization Interfaces - Asynchronous interaction.

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CHI 2006, April 22–27, 2006, Montréal, Québec, Canada.
ACM 1-59593-298-4/06/0004.

Roberta reclines on a couch in the Hardwick's candle shop engaging in erotic banter over the telephone with her boyfriend. As they participate in the technologically mediated exchange, her hands wander over her body in an intimate fashion. The conversation ends, yet a distinctly sexual mood has been established. The mood remains as the action shifts from the virtual to the real world and Roberta continues to engage in intimate pleasure, not only with herself, but on their return to the candle shop, both Mr. and Mrs. Hardwick [11].

Figure 1: Scene from Debbie Does Dallas (1978)

Introduction

The scene from the 1970's porn classic 'Debbie Does Dallas' [10] (figure 1) provides an example of how intimacy and sexual interactions traverse real and virtual environments. It is well known that interactive technology has been appropriated for the mediation and expression of desire and intimacy. Yet, while much research has been conducted into how technology mediates interactions in organizational, social and more recently domestic domains, far less attention has been given to design that facilitates sexual practices.

We believe that to facilitate the design of technologies that may offer innovative means of engaging in sex, critical analysis must move beyond issues of physical stimulation and address the emotional aspects of interaction within a social and cultural context. The field of critical technical practice (CTP) [8, 9] is helpful in this regard because CTP focuses our attention on the values embedded in technology and encourages us to produce new designs that support 'authentic, rich human experiences' [9].

In this paper we draw on our previous investigations of mediating intimacy [1,2,3,4,5,6,7], coupled with the critical analysis provided by CTP, to suggest an agenda for future design of technology that facilitate sexual interactivity in the context of strong-tie, intimate relationships. In so doing, we acknowledge the distinction between intimacy and sex, yet stress the connection to avoid reducing mediated sex to a series of 'differently embodied' [12] one night stands or bordello visits. In order to contribute to the development of new technologies that mediate the emotional as well as physical aspects of sex, we retain the focus on intimacy from our previous research. Thus,

future work into the development of technologically mediated sex can be embedded within the nuances of social relationships.

Approaching the problem

It is now commonplace to call for a non-instrumental view of the relations between technology and people. Such a view might for example stress the 'fulfilling exchange of emotion' rather than the 'efficient communication of information'. Though desirable, there are dangers along this path. In the rush to radically enrich our view of people beyond the machine-based metaphor, there is a risk (to misquote George Orwell) of unquestioningly parroting 'people good, machine bad'. There are a number of concerns with this position. The first is the notion that authentic interaction is confined to face-to-face encounters. The second is the idealization of intimacy.

Challenging face-to-face notions of intimacy

Face-to-face interactions are traditionally seen as the only authentic form of intimacy, and therefore, used as the benchmark for evaluating the worth of artifacts for mediating intimacy. Yet, as can be seen from the research conducted by Turkle [11], there is great pleasure to be gained from interaction in digital environments. Furthermore, at times, technologically mediated interactions can be more rewarding than those that occur in everyday life, allowing users to transcend the limits of the real world. Turkle notes the case of an HIV positive man who has promiscuous online sex.

It can be seen that there is a need to understand and support variations of intimacy that fall outside traditional constructs, where the 'authentic' experience

is embodied by face-to-face intimacy. How, for example, should we understand co-located but mediated intimacy? Similarly, how does one enable mediated sex, co-located or otherwise, without falling prey to notions of authentically reproduced haptic stimulation? How can sex be 'differently embodied' yet retain its connection to intimacy and emotion?

Critically Analyzing the Idealization of Intimacy

Face-to-face intimacy is seen as a 'gift' to be cherished and fostered. Viewed from this perspective, it is rarely made explicit that intimacy has attendant downsides and can be beset with breakdowns. We have earlier [1, 2] theorized intimacy in such idealized terms. By critically challenging the process of idealization, a new set of concerns emerge:

- What should our position be in relation to the 'unsentimental' facets of intimacy?
- Are we destined to try to 'fix' them as we interleave technology and strong-tie relationships?
- What social purposes do these breakdowns and problems serve within relationships?

In problematizing intimacy, and in turn, sexual interactions, we need to be sensitive to its social significance of our research.

PUTTING INTIMACY IN ITS PLACE

"Marge, I'm going to miss you so much. And it's not just about sex. It's also the food preparation."
(Homer J Simpson)

All of the major disciplines that take the relations between technology and people as their central problem (HCI, CSCW, Information Systems, SCoT etc) emerged from the difficulties and opportunities

organizations faced in moving from manual to computerized systems. It is mundane now to point to the limitations of this earlier good work when our primary focus is 'non-workers' doing 'non-work' in 'non-organizational' settings. However in earning legitimacy for a non-instrumental view of the relations between people and technology (i.e. we interact with technology for reasons other than the effective and efficient meeting of tangible goals), and a focus on non-instrumental activity (e.g. aesthetic pleasure, loving, passing the time) we risk creating an exclusive relationship between the instrumental and non-instrumental; between the 'phallic' and the 'phatic' [4]. Two key questions emerge:

- What is the character of the interrelationships between instrumental (e.g. work of the home, routine and dutiful in its disposition) and non-instrumental (e.g. loving) human activities?
- What purposes does intimacy serve beyond the immediately obvious?

RISK AND LOSS

Our earlier work was partly inspired by an anecdote about miners in the Australian outback. The miners, who work a month-on/month-off shift system (that is they spend alternately a month with their families, and a month away in the coal fields), suffer a 75% divorce rate. Compelling enough reason to examine their family dynamic one might think. Yet, the implications of a new technology that could provide sexual intimacy under these conditions might be explored. Three issues arise. In championing mediated intimacy more broadly, do we risk denying those intimate partners who live under less distributed conditions, the opportunity to be apart? What functions do absences play? When previously

separated partners come together do they do so in a way heightened by absence?

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The fact that designing for such highly personal matter as mediating sex has become the topic of HCI is evidence of advancement of the field. Furthermore, it may also indicate a sense in the field that human-computer interaction has evolved to the point that it can now service truly intimate contact, or mediate intimate human-human interaction.

In order to meet the challenges of developing new technology that can successfully meet the emotional and physical needs of sexual interactions we need a research agenda that is:

- Addressing issues of palpable social need. We need a compelling social rationale for the problems we select that is digestible by the societies that fund and benefit from our research, if we are to do more than 'hobby research'.
- Design led but empirically grounded. The sociological literature on intimacy has been less than useful in attempts to discuss mediated intimacy. What in the fields of social science should be mined further, and how do we render that knowledge useful for our design-oriented purposes?
- Intentionally critical of its own practice, and especially the nature of its assumptions and problematization [8, 9].

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